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**The Raft** by Betsey Byars

(an excerpt from *Noble River*)

Dewy took a deep breath and, glancing over his shoulder, started down the path. At the bank of the river he paused to look down at his raft. He felt better as he looked at his handiwork. Dewey thought that it was the most beautiful sight he had ever seen.

As he stood there he had a brief, startlingly clear picture of himself on the raft under the long, green shadows of the trees down the river. He saw his hands, broad and strong, gripping the oar and thrusting it into the shallow water, sending the raft over the water like a wind-blown leaf.

Smiling, he glanced over his shoulder again and then stepped onto the raft. It was made of nine logs lashed together with strips of hide and was approximately six feet across and eight feet long. Atop the logs Dewey had laid a floor of smaller split logs, nailing them so that they formed a platform. He had done all the work himself and he felt a pride that he had never known before.

It was the only thing he had ever made that was for himself alone. His family was almost machine-like in the way they worked to keep alive and comfortable, and sometimes Dewey felt that every hour of his day was taken up with the land and the animals; that he was part of the farm in the same way that the plow was, or the wagon. The raft was a separate thing, built only to give pleasure.

It seemed to him as fine as any of the rafts he had seen on the big rivers. Five years before, while waiting to cross the Mississippi, he had counted a string of a hundred and twenty rafts on its long journey to New Orleans. He had seen the low doghouses for the crew to sleep in, and a raft as big as a field with a tent for the family and fences for the horses and pigs. His was just as sturdy, just as ready to withstand the twists of the current as those.

He knelt at the front of the raft where he had put a large split log with the smooth side to the front. He took some stain he had made from old walnut hulls and dipped his finger into it and began to print across the front of the log. Slowly, carefully, ignoring the stain that was running down his finger, he began to print the first letter— *T*. He leaned back and looked at it and, not displeased, dipped his finger into the stain again.

A wolf howled in the night, and Dewey glanced up. The howl was far away, and after a moment he resumed his work. Once he had seen the wolves from the doorway of the cabin. They had sat in a half circle in the deep grass and howled in the moonlight, and when one wolf—the leader—had turned toward the cabin, his eyes had flashed green in the moonlight. Sometimes Dewey saw their tracks at the river and in the creek bottoms, but tonight they were far away, chasing elk and deer.

His hair, bleached pale from the sun, fell unnoticed over his eyes, and in the moonlight his tanned face was darker than his hair. The tip of his tongue touched his upper lip as he worked. Now he straightened and looked at the words he had printed. *The Rosey B*. The letters were even and again he felt a surge of pride. The *Rosey B* is a good ship, he thought as he looked her over, and now she was ready for her first voyage.

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There was a loop of rope thrown over a stump on the bank to hold the raft to shore, and he slipped this off and coiled the rope at his feet. With mounting excitement, his fear forgotten, he bent and picked up the oar lying across the raft. This was his treasure. He had found it on the bank of Big River a year ago when he and his pa had gone over to get some wild plum trees.

“Pa, look, I found me an oar,” he had cried. His pa had looked up, nodded, then gone back to working the shovel around the young plum tree.

“Can I take it home?” Dewey had stood clutching the oar in his dirty hands, thinking of other people who might have held it. “It’s a sturdy oar, Pa.”

“Keep it.”

“Yahoo,” he had cried. Putting his weight to the oar, he had swung a few feet off the ground before he had told his pa what he had thought the first moment he had seen the oar in the thick grass. “Pa, one day I’ll make me a boat.”

His pa had nodded.

“I’ll make me a real boat and go everywhere.”

And now he had his boat. Taking the oar, he jammed it against the muddy bank and pushed with all his might. He leaned on the oar, and slowly, heavily the raft moved into the water. It stuck on the muddy bottom, and Dewey pushed again. He could feel his head pounding with the effort. Then there was a certain lightness, an ease in the movement. He was afloat! For the first time he was afloat. He prepared to sweep the oar through the water. He had practiced many times on shore and anticipated the powerful surge of the raft.

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